## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Pathways and key intermediates required for obligate aerobic ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy in bacteria and Thaumarchaeota

Jessica A Kozlowski[1], Michaela Stieglmeier[2,3], Christa Schleper[2], Martin G Klotz[4,5] and Lisa Y Stein[1]

[1]Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada; [2]Department of Ecogenomics and Systems Biology, Division Archaea Biology and Ecogenomics, University of Vienna, Wien, Austria; [3]Department of Biology I, Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Biocenter, Planegg-Martinsried, Germany; [4]Department of Biology, Queens College, The City University of New York, Flushing, NY, USA and [5]Institute of Marine Microbes & Ecospheres and State Key Laboratory of Marine Environmental Science, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China

Chemolithotrophic ammonia-oxidizing bacteria and Thaumarchaeota are central players in the global nitrogen cycle. Obligate ammonia chemolithotrophy has been characterized for bacteria; however, large gaps remain in the Thaumarchaeotal pathway. Using batch growth experiments and instantaneous microrespirometry measurements of resting biomass, we show that the terrestrial Thaumarchaeon *Nitrososphaera viennensis* EN76[T] exhibits tight control over production and consumption of nitric oxide (NO) during ammonia catabolism, unlike the ammonia-oxidizing bacterium *Nitrosospira multiformis* ATCC 25196[T]. In particular, pulses of hydroxylamine into a microelectrode chamber as the sole substrate for *N. viennensis* resulted in iterative production and consumption of NO followed by conversion of hydroxylamine to nitrite. In support of these observations, oxidation of ammonia in growing cultures of *N. viennensis*, but not of *N. multiformis*, was inhibited by the NO-scavenger PTIO. When based on the marginal nitrous oxide ($N_2O$) levels detected in cell-free media controls, the higher levels produced by *N. multiformis* were explained by enzyme activity, whereas $N_2O$ in *N. viennensis* cultures was attributed to abiotic reactions of released N-oxide intermediates with media components. Our results are conceptualized in a pathway for ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy in Thaumarchaea, which identifies NO as an essential intermediate in the pathway and implements known biochemistry to be executed by a proposed but still elusive copper enzyme. Taken together, this work identifies differences in ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy between bacteria and the Thaumarchaeota, advances a central catabolic role of NO only in the Thaumarchaeotal pathway and reveals stark differences in how the two microbial cohorts contribute to $N_2O$ emissions.

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## Introduction

Ammonia-oxidizing archaea, in the phylum Thaumarchaeota, and ammonia-oxidizing bacteria are abundant and diverse microorganisms that control the oxidation of ammonia ($NH_3$) to nitrite ($NO_2^-$) in the global biogeochemical nitrogen cycle. Through many decades of research, the biochemical pathway for chemolithotrophic growth of ammonia-oxidizing bacteria has been principally elucidated (Sayavedra-Soto and Arp, 2011); however, this pathway has yet to be characterized in the more recently discovered thaumarchaeotal ammonia-oxidizers. This lesser understanding is largely due to the difficulty of growing reliable and sufficient biomass from pure cultures for performing physiological experiments, thus making identification of the genetic inventory that supports chemolithotrophic growth of the thaumarchaeotal ammonia-oxidizers a challenge. In contrast, the pathways for the autotrophic assimilation of carbon have been identified in both cohorts (Arp *et al.*, 2007; Könneke *et al.*, 2014).

Previous experiments with the marine isolate *Nitrosopumilus maritimus* SCM1 indicated that ammonia oxidation is dependent on the activity of the ammonia monooxygenase enzyme and (an) unknown enzyme(s) that convert(s) hydroxylamine ($NH_2OH$) to $NO_2^-$ and provide electrons for energy

Correspondence: LY Stein, Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alberta, CW 405 Biological Sciences Building, Edmonton, Alberta T6G2E9, Canada.
E-mail: lisa.stein@ualberta.ca

conservation (Vajrala *et al.*, 2012). In ammonia-oxidizing bacteria, this second step is performed by hydroxylamine dehydrogenase (EC 1.7.2.6); however, no homologues of hydroxylamine dehydrogenase-encoding genes have been identified in genome sequences obtained from any pure or enrichment culture of Thaumarchaea (Walker *et al.*, 2010; Kim *et al.*, 2011; Tourna *et al.*, 2011; Spang *et al.*, 2012). In addition to $NH_2OH$, there is also evidence that nitric oxide (NO) plays an important role in the Thaumarchaeotal but not in the bacterial ammonia oxidation pathway (Shen *et al.*, 2013; Martens-Habbena *et al.*, 2015). Martens-Habbena *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that NO accumulated in *N. maritimus* SCM1 cultures during active oxidation of $NH_4Cl$ in a closed microrespirometry chamber, and was released at higher levels under saturating versus non-saturating availability of $NH_4Cl$. Exposure to increasing concentrations of an NO-scavenging compound over a 24 h period resulted in decreased levels of nitrite production in batch cultures of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea, but not bacteria (Martens-Habbena *et al.*, 2015). The authors concluded that NO was either released as a free intermediate during ammonia oxidation by *N. maritimus*, or it could serve a functional role as an electron delivery mechanism to ammonia monooxygenase, an idea that has been proposed previously (Schleper and Nicol, 2010).

Although the detection of nitrous oxide ($N_2O$) has been reported for both enrichments and pure cultures of Thaumarchaea engaged in ammonia oxidation (Santoro *et al.*, 2011; Loscher *et al.*, 2012; Jung *et al.*, 2014; Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014b), the isotope data reported by Stieglmeier *et al.* (2014b) revealed that ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea cannot enzymatically reduce $NO_2^-$ to $N_2O$ via NO in the pathway known as 'nitrifier denitrification'. Several publications have suggested that ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea are a major source of $N_2O$ to the environment based on their relative abundance in oxic environments, the isotopic signature of the detected $N_2O$, and that the authors failed to detect known bacterial denitrification genes and pertinent activities (Santoro *et al.*, 2011; Loscher *et al.*, 2012; Jung *et al.*, 2014). Yet, control experiments to verify or falsify chemical formation of $N_2O$ facilitated by interaction of Thaumarchaeotal metabolites with components of the cultivation or incubation media or assay solutions remain absent from the literature. It should be noted that interactions of ammonia oxidation intermediates with iron, manganese, and organic compounds could generate substantial amounts of $N_2O$ under environmentally relevant conditions (Zhu-Barker *et al.*, 2015).

The present study addresses critical ecophysiological questions about how two different cohorts of microorganisms, simultaneously involved in the biogeochemical nitrogen cycle through ammonia-oxidation, vary in their contributions, particularly to production of nitrous oxide. This study also furthers

the observation of NO as an intermediate for ammonia chemolithotrophy in the terrestrial Thaumarchaeon *Nitrososphaera viennensis* strain EN76[T] (Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014a) by examining its complete profile of NO production and consumption during substrate oxidation at oxic conditions and the transition into an extended period of anoxia. In contrast to the above referenced studies of '$N_2O$ production' by ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea, our results do not support any scenario in which *N. viennensis* enzymatically reduces NO to $N_2O$ through a denitrification pathway. Instead, the results support that $N_2O$ was formed abiotically from NO by interaction with media components or with debris in killed cell controls. We further demonstrated that NO is an active and necessary intermediate during the oxidation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ in ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea rather than participating directly in the oxidation of $NH_3$ to $NH_2OH$ as suggested previously (Schleper and Nicol, 2010). Based on these results, a new pathway for obligate ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy for ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea is proposed that implicates a novel copper enzyme to perform a biochemistry known to occur in ammonia-oxidizing bacteria facilitated by heme-containing cytochrome *c*.

## Materials and methods

### Strains and cultivation
*N. viennensis* strain EN76[T] was maintained at 37 °C in 50 ml freshwater medium (FWM) supplemented with 2 mM $NH_4Cl$, 0.5 mM sodium pyruvate and 50 µg/ml carbenicillin and buffered with HEPES (Tourna *et al.*, 2011; Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014a) and inoculated at 4% v/v. Cultures were grown in Wheaton bottles (150 ml) sealed with caps inlaid with grey butyl rubber stoppers. *Nitrosospira multiformis* ATCC 25196[T] was maintained at 28 °C in 100 ml HEPES-buffered HK medium (HKM) (Krümmel and Harms, 1982) containing 3 mM ammonium and phenol red as pH indicator (pH of 7.5–8) and inoculated at 5% v/v into 250 ml Wheaton bottles. The pH of *N. multiformis* cultures was maintained with regular additions of 10% $NaHCO_3$.

### Growth experiments with NO-scavenger PTIO
For monitoring activity in the presence of an NO-scavenging compound, *N. viennensis* was cultivated in 20 ml FWM. *N. multiformis* was cultivated in 20 ml phosphate-buffered mineral medium (Skinner and Walker, 1961) amended with 1 mM $NH_4Cl$ and pH was adjusted regularly with 5% $Na_2CO_3$. In early to mid-exponential phase of growth, 150 µM of 2-phenyl-4,4,5,5,-tetramethylimidazoline-1-oxyl 3-oxide (PTIO; Sigma-Aldrich, Vienna, Austria), a chemical that scavenges NO (Goldstein *et al.*, 2003)

was injected into the cultures. Ammonium consumption and nitrite production were measured over a period of 6–8 days using standard colorimetric assays (Clesceri *et al.*, 1998) and $N_2O$ was measured via GC (AGILENT 6890N, Vienna, Austria; injector: 120 °C, detector: 350 °C, oven: 35 °C, carrier gas: $N_2$) in connection with an automatic sample-injection system (DANI HSS 86.50, Head-space-Sampler, Sprockhövel, Germany). Detailed sampling and sample preparation has been described previously (Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014a).

### Instantaneous measurement of NO and N₂O during oxidation of ammonia

In preparation for experiments measuring instantaneous $O_2$ consumption and either NO or $N_2O$ production, *N. viennensis* was inoculated at 4% v/v into 2 l of HEPES-buffered FWM and *N. multiformis* was inoculated at 5% v/v into 250 ml HKM. Cells were harvested at late exponential phase (*N. viennensis*, 1–1.5 mM $NO_2^-$; *N. multiformis*, 2–2.5 mM $NO_2^-$) by filtration on Supor200 0.2 μm filters (Pall, Ann Arbor, WI, USA) and rinsed three times with substrate-free media (*N. viennensis*, FWM; *N. multiformis*, HKM). Washed cells (*N. viennensis*, ca. $1 \times 10^{11}$ total cells; *N. multiformis*, ca. $1 \times 10^{10}$ total cells) were resuspended into 10 ml of substrate-free growth medium for each strain in a 10 ml two-port microrespiratory (MR) chamber with fitted injection lids (Unisense, Aarhus, Denmark). Cell concentrations for microrespirometry experiments were chosen on the basis of comparable oxygen consumption rates between the two strains. $O_2$ concentration was measured using an OX-MR 500 μm tip diameter MR oxygen electrode (Unisense), $N_2O$ concentration was measured using an $N_2O$-500 $N_2O$ minisensor electrode with 500 μm tip diameter (Unisense), and NO was measured using an ami-600 NO sensor with 600 μm tip diameter (Innovative Instruments Inc., Tampa, FL, USA). The availability of $O_2$ in the MR chamber, a closed system, corresponded to either ca. 207 μM $O_2$ (FWM) or ca. 243 μM $O_2$ (HKM) respectively, based on equilibrium $O_2$ concentration at operating temperatures and medium salinities. For microrespirometry experiments involving ammonia oxidation, cells were provided 2 mM $NH_4Cl$. The microrespirometry chamber was maintained at 37 °C and 28 °C for measurements with *N. vienennsis* and *N. multiformis* cells, respectively, reflecting their optimal growth temperatures.

### Instantaneous measurement of NO from N. viennensis during oxidation of NH₂OH

For experiments measuring the oxidation of $NH_2OH$ (99.999% purity, Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, MO, USA), *N. viennensis* was provided with multiple additions of 200 μM $NH_2OH$ (based on chamber volume) to maintain a steady rate of $O_2$ consumption. NO production was measured until $O_2$ was undetectable in the chamber. Samples were taken post-experiment for $NO_2^-$ measurements.

### Instantaneous ammonia and hydroxylamine oxidation by N. viennensis in the presence of PTIO

Microrespirometry experiments with the NO-scavenger PTIO were performed with *N. viennensis* cells harvested as described above; cells were incubated with 200 μM PTIO in the dark with shaking at 37 °C for 1 h prior to adding the cells to a 2 ml 1-port MR chamber at 37 °C for the measurement of $NH_4^+$- and $NH_2OH$-dependent $O_2$ consumption (Supplementary Figure S1). Confirmation of the NO-scavenging activity of PTIO was confirmed chemically by addition of 1 μl PAPA NONOate ((Z)-1-[N-(3-aminopropyl)-N-(n-propyl)amino]diazen-1-ium-1,2-diolate; Cayman Chemical, Ann Arbor, MI, USA; half-life of 15 min at 37 °C liberating 2 moles of NO per mole of parent compound) to FWM in the 2 ml MR chamber with the NO sensor at 37 °C. Once the rate of NO release from PAPA NONOate slowed, 200 μM PTIO was added to the chamber and NO disappearance was immediately measured. After ~ 7 min of NO-chelation by PTIO, another 1 μl of PAPA NONOate was added but NO levels remained below detection levels (Supplementary Figure S2).

### Instantaneous measurement of N₂O from media and killed-cell controls

To measure the abiotic production of $N_2O$ from either FWM or HKM, 10 ml of cell-free media was added to the 10 ml MR chamber. The NO-donor MAHMA NONOate (6-(2-Hydroxy-1-methyl-2-nitrosohydrazino)-N-methyl-1-hexanamine, NOC-9; Cayman Chemical) was added to the MR chamber in increasing additions of 20–100 μl, which is equivalent to the release of ca. 1.1–5.5 μM NO, or in a single addition of 100 μl (ca. 5.5 μM NO). The half-life of MAHMA NONOate at pH 7.4 is 1 min and 3 min at 37 °C and 22–25 °C, respectively. $N_2O$ production was measured using the $N_2O$ microelectrode during the decay of 1 mol MAHMA NONOate into 2 moles NO in either FWM or HKM. Experiments were performed at 37 °C and 28 °C for FWM and HKM, respectively, after sparging to ca. 0–3% $O_2$ saturation with $N_2$ (Praxair) as determined by $O_2$ electrode. Chemical controls to confirm that FWM alone did not react with $NH_2OH$ to form measureable NO involved addition of 200, 400 and 600 μM $NH_2OH$ to sparged (ca. 0–3% $O_2$) FWM or FWM+200 μM $NO_2^-$ to reflect maximum concentration available once cells depleted MR chamber $O_2$ (Supplementary Figures S3a and b). Control experiments with heat killed *N. viennensis* (ca. $1 \times 10^{11}$ cells) were performed in sparged FWM+NaNO₂ (200 μM) with measurement of NO and $N_2O$ upon addition of 200 μM $NH_2OH$ (Supplementary Figure S4) to determine whether $NH_2OH$ interacts with cellular debris.

# Results

*Effects of the NO-scavenger PTIO on N₂O levels measured in cultures of* N. viennensis *and* N. multiformis

To investigate the role of NO in chemolithotrophic oxidation of ammonia to nitrite and generation of $N_2O$ in these two organisms, batch cultures of *N. viennensis* or *N. multiformis* were grown to mid-log phase, at which point PTIO (150 μM) was added (Figure 1). Addition of PTIO resulted in the immediate saturation of $N_2O$ levels in either culture as would be expected in the absence or decreasing levels of NO intermediates. However, in cultures of *N. viennensis*, PTIO also caused an inhibition of both ammonium consumption and nitrite production (Figure 1a), whereas in cultures of *N. multiformis,* ammonia oxidation and nitrite production continued at the same rate as before PTIO addition (Figure 1b). These results indicated that NO is an essential, dynamic, intermediate in the process of ammonia oxidation to nitrite and thus ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy for *N. viennensis*, but not for *N. multiformis*.
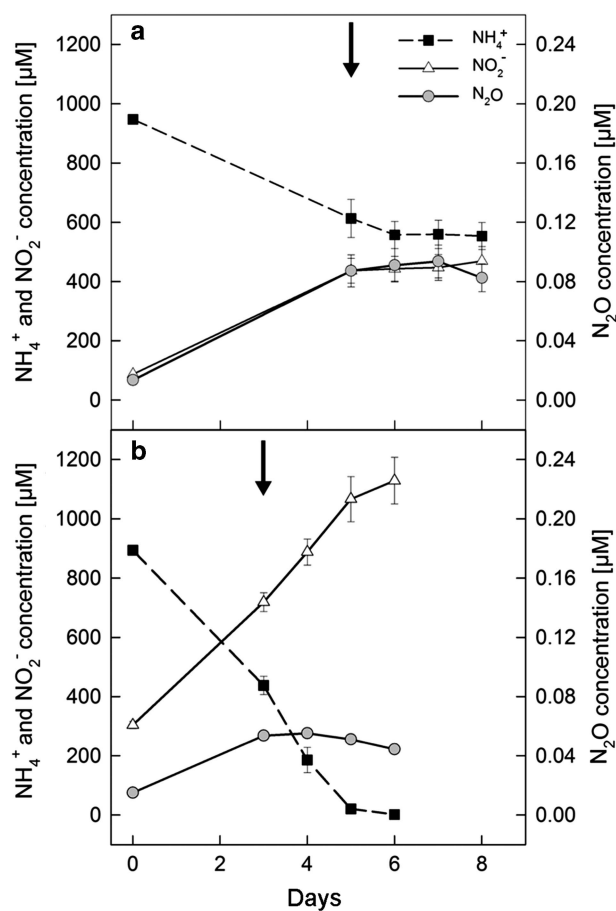


**Figure 1** Inhibition of *N. viennensis* (**a**) and *N. multiformis* (**b**) with the NO-scavenger PTIO. Ammonium consumption (black squares, dotted line) and nitrite production (white triangles, solid line) as well as $N_2O$ production (gray circles, solid line) are plotted. The black arrow indicates the time point of PTIO addition (150 μgml⁻¹) to the cultures. Mean values of five-fold replicated experiments with standard deviations are shown.

*Dynamics of NO and N₂O production during and following ammonia oxidation*

The effect of PTIO on growing cultures of *N. viennensis* and *N. multiformis* indicated different requirements for NO during ammonia oxidation. Using a MR chamber, the dynamics of NO production and consumption were measured during and after ammonia oxidation (2 mM NH₄Cl) by *N. viennensis* or *N. multiformis* as determined by $O_2$ consumption profiles (Figures 2a and c). To achieve an equivalent rate of $O_2$ consumption for rate comparison, 10 times more *N. viennensis* than *N. multiformis* cells were required in the MR chamber. Whereas *N. multiformis* showed a linear rate of $O_2$ consumption during ammonia oxidation (Figure 2c), the initial rate of $O_2$ consumption by *N. viennensis* was quite rapid, followed by a slower, linear rate (Figures 2a and b). *N. viennensis* produced a maximum of ca. 1.41 nM of NO per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells ($n = 4$) at the beginning of substrate oxidation, concomitant with the initial rapid rate of $O_2$ consumption. The NO was immediately re-consumed as the cells achieved the slower, linear rate of $O_2$ consumption (Figure 2a). After *ca.* 3 min from the point at which $O_2$ became undetectable, *N. viennensis* cells began to release NO reaching a maximum of *ca.* 1.39 nM per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells ($n = 4$). None of the NO released by *N. viennensis* following $O_2$ depletion was re-consumed. In contrast, *N. multiformis* produced a maximum of ca. 92.15 nM NO per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells ($n = 4$) and re-consumption of NO began once *ca.* 50% of the available $O_2$ was consumed (Figure 2c).

Levels of $N_2O$ were measured during and following ammonia oxidation; however, no $N_2O$ was detectable during ammonia oxidation by cells of either microbe (Figures 2b and d). Assays including *N. viennensis* cells contained measurable $N_2O$ levels increasing at a non-linear rate after *ca.* 5 min following depletion of $O_2$, yielding an average maximum at *ca.* 40 min of 0.19 μM per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells (Figure 2b; $n = 4$). In contrast, assays including *N. multiformis* cells contained measurable $N_2O$ levels immediately upon $O_2$ depletion increasing at a linear rate to an average maximum of 5.6 μM per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells at *ca.* 40 min (Figure 2d; $n = 4$).

*Dynamics of NO production and consumption during NH₂OH oxidation by* N. viennensis *EN76ᵀ*

Although the experiments described above indicated that *N. viennensis* cultures produce and consume NO during ammonia oxidation to nitrite, it was not clear whether NO acted as an intermediate in the ammonia- or hydroxylamine-oxidizing step of the pathway. Therefore, we examined production and consumption of NO by *N. viennensis* cells when fed with $NH_2OH$ instead of ammonium. $NH_2OH$ was added in 200 μM pulses to the MR chamber containing *N. viennensis* cells to support linear $O_2$ consumption until all of the available $O_2$ was

consumed (Figure 3). Each subsequent addition of equal aliquots of $NH_2OH$ led to the production of *ca.* 5 nM NO per $1 \times 10^{10}$ cells ($n = 3$), followed by an immediate re-consumption of NO and $O_2$ until the next addition of $NH_2OH$ (Figure 3). $NO_2^-$ accumulated to *ca.* 206 µM ($n = 3$) in the culture medium, which matched the *ca.* 207 µM $O_2$ consumed during the time course of the experiment. Importantly, free conversion of $NH_2OH$ to NO in the absence of cells was stochastic and insignificant (Supplementary Figure S3a). Addition of $NH_2OH$ to FWM containing 200 µM $NaNO_2$ resulted in the production of *ca.* 4 nM NO but only once a concentration of 1.2 mM $NH_2OH$ was reached in the MR chamber (Supplementary Figure S3b).

In an effort to demonstrate the requirement of NO by *N. viennensis* for the oxidation of either $NH_3$ or $NH_2OH$, washed *N. viennensis* cells were incubated with 200 µM PTIO for 1 h prior to measurement of $NH_4^+$- or $NH_2OH$-dependent $O_2$ consumption. The presence of PTIO did not prevent substrate-dependent $O_2$ consumption of either substrate by *N. viennensis* cells (Supplementary Figure S1), although PTIO was able to effectively scavenge NO in cell-free FWM containing the NO-donating compound, PAPA-NONOate (Supplementary Figure S2).

*Detection of abiotic $N_2O$ in growth media without viable cells*

Inspired by the observed differences in $N_2O$ production profiles between cultures of *N. viennensis* and *N. multiformis*, we performed abiotic experiments in the MR chamber using cell-free FWM or HKM and the NO-donating compound, MAHMA NONOate. Addition of MAHMA NONOate to FWM released *ca.* 5.5 µM NO, 70% of which was converted to $N_2O$ (Figure 4a). In contrast, addition of an equal aliquot of MAHMA NONOate to HKM resulted in only a 20% conversion of the released NO to $N_2O$ (Figure 4c). Continuous addition of MAHMA NONOate to produce 1.1–5.5 µM NO in FWM or HKM resulted in a sustained high-efficiency conversion of released NO to $N_2O$ only in FWM, but not
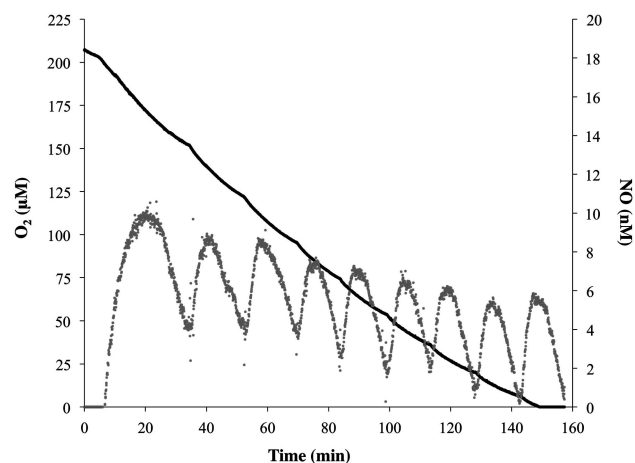


**Figure 3** Instantaneous measurements of $O_2$ consumption (black line) and NO production (grey dots) from 200 µM pulses of $NH_2OH$ in liquid phase incubations of *N. viennensis* in the absence of $NH_4^+$. Plot is a single representative of replicable experiments ($n = 4$).
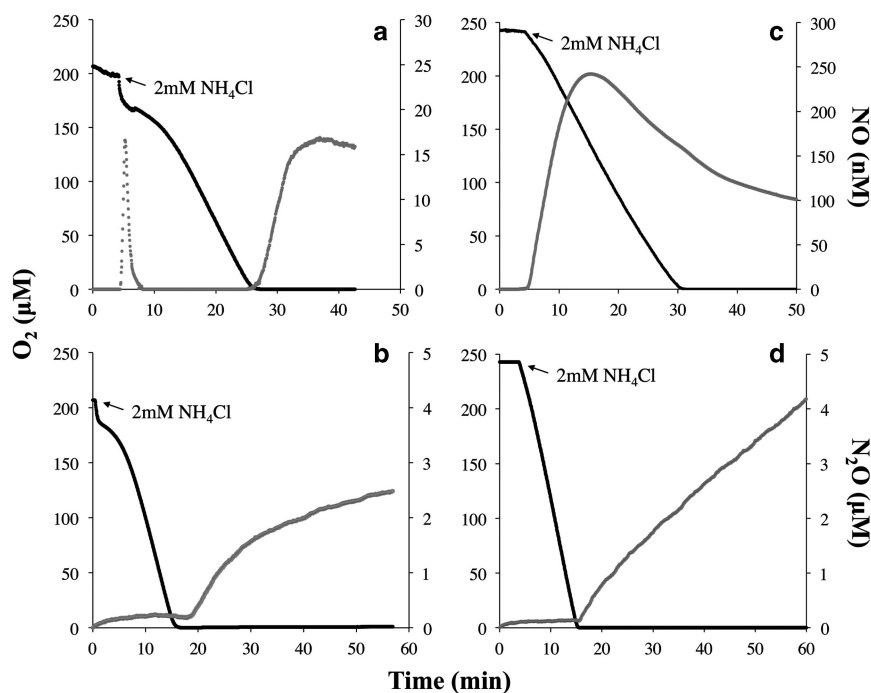


**Figure 2** Instantaneous measurements of $O_2$ (black line), NO (**a** and **c**) and $N_2O$ (**b** and **d**) (gray dots) after addition of 2 mM $NH_4Cl$ in liquid phase suspensions of *N. viennensis* (**a** and **b**) and *N. multiformis* (**c** and **d**) cells. Panels are single representative measurements of reproducible results ($n = 4$). Note that y-axes for NO are on different scales for *N. viennensis* versus *N. multiformis*. *N. viennensis* cell concentration was $10^{11}$ cells per ml, whereas *N. multiformis* cell concentration was $10^{10}$ cells per ml to achieve equivalent rates of $O_2$ consumption by the two strains.
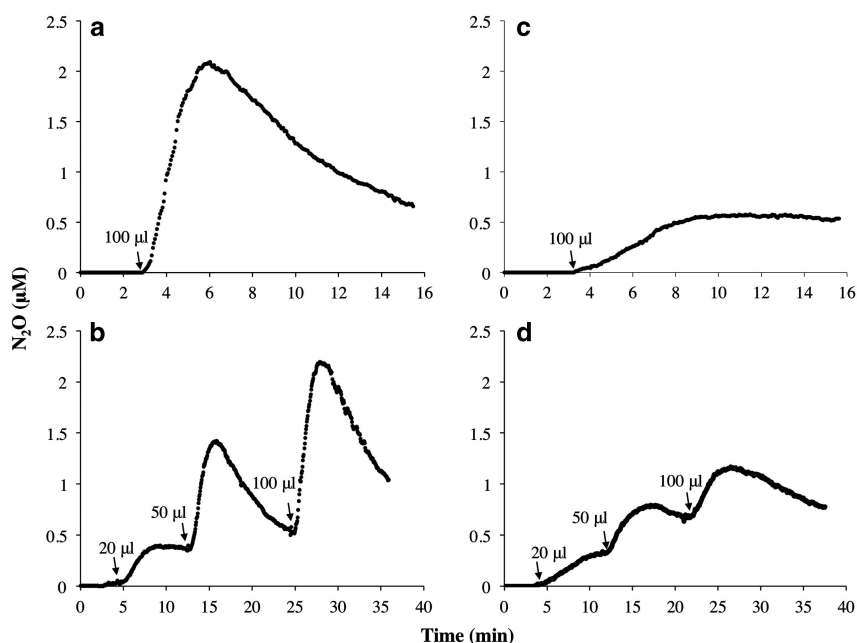
**Figure 4** Abiotic production of $N_2O$ from the NO-donor MAHMA NONOate in either FWM (**a** and **b**) or HKM (**c** and **d**). Panels are single representative measurements of reproducible results ($n = 3$). The addition of varying concentrations of MAHMA NONOate is indicated by arrows.

HKM (Figures 4b and d). Reactivity of $NH_2OH$ in FWM+heat-killed *N. viennensis* cells was also explored (Supplementary Figure S4). When $NH_2OH$ was introduced into the MR chamber containing heat-killed cells, accumulation of NO reached *ca.* 110 nM NO over 5 min (Supplementary Figure S4a). After 30 min, $N_2O$ accumulated to levels of *ca.* 90 µM, demonstrating that $NH_2OH$ was eventually converted to $N_2O$ in the absence of physiologically active cells (Supplementary Figure S4b).

## Discussion

*The NO-scavenger, PTIO, stops ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy of* N. viennensis
The measured cessation of ammonium consumption and nitrite production upon PTIO addition to growing cultures of *N. viennensis* demonstrates the requirement of free NO for ammonia chemolithotrophy that was not observed for *N. multiformis*. These results confirm prior growth experiments with enrichment cultures (Jung *et al.*, 2014) and reported effects on nitrite production and activity by ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea and bacteria incubated with PTIO (Shen *et al.*, 2013; Martens-Habbena *et al.*, 2015). For both *N. viennensis* and *N. multiformis*, PTIO addition abolished $N_2O$ production, suggesting that the presence of the enzyme-generated free NO intermediate is required for formation of $N_2O$ production by both strains, regardless of whether NO is reduced biotically by enzyme activity or abiotically.

*NO is produced and immediately consumed during active ammonia oxidation by* N. viennensis *EN76*[T]
The initial, rapid production of NO followed by its equally rapid consumption during ammonia-dependent $O_2$ consumption by *N. viennensis* differed from results in similar experiments with *N. maritimus* SCM1 (Martens-Habbena *et al.*, 2015). In this prior study, *N. maritimus* SCM1 produced NO at a steady-state level prior to its consumption once $NH_4^+$ was depleted or its partial consumption at saturating concentrations of $NH_4^+$. A major difference in the two profiles observed for both cultures was that $O_2$ levels remained quite high in assays with *N. maritimus* SCM1 such that complete consumption of NO was not observed as a function of time and $O_2$ consumption as observed for *N. viennensis* EN76[T]. Even so, experiments with both *N. viennensis* and *N. maritimus* confirm that NO is being produced and consumed during ammonia oxidation. In addition, the present experiments demonstrate that NO is being released at the onset of anoxia. A likely fate of released NO at anoxia was its conversion to $N_2O$, because 1000 times more $N_2O$ than NO was measured once the microrespirometry chamber reached anoxia, suggesting rapid conversion of released NO to $N_2O$ (Figures 2a and c). Another contributor to $N_2O$ levels measured in anoxic assays with *N. viennensis* cells could be the reactivity of cell components with released $NH_2OH$ as heat-killed cells showed a rapid conversion of exogenous $NH_2OH$ to measureable NO and $N_2O$ (Supplementary figure S4).

NO dynamics during ammonium-dependent $O_2$ consumption by *N. multiformis* showed a vastly different profile compared to that of either *N. viennensis*

or *N. maritimus*, revealing *ca.* 10 times more NO released from the cells, some of which was slowly re-consumed during ammonia oxidation and through anoxia. The comparison of NOx profiles in microrespirometry measurements with cells of *N. multiformis* and the ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea reveals an intriguing difference in how NOx is metabolized during ammonia oxidation by bacteria and Thaumarchaea, which requires further investigation. Unlike *N. viennensis*, $N_2O$ production by *N. multiformis* during anoxia was linear and 10 times more $N_2O$ was produced per number of cells. This is a confirmatory evidence that ammonia-oxidizing bacteria, but not *N. viennensis*, are capable of producing $N_2O$ enzymatically via nitrifier denitrification (Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014b).

### NO is produced and consumed during $NH_2OH$ oxidation to $NO_2^-$ in N. viennensis

The rapid production and consumption of NO during $NH_2OH$ oxidation by *N. viennensis* along with the stoichiometric production of $NO_2^-$ with $O_2$ consumption suggest that NO is directly participating in the dehydrogenation of $NH_2OH$. Recent models have postulated that NO is involved in providing reductant to ammonia monooxygenase (Schleper and Nicol, 2010; Stahl and de la Torre, 2012); however, if this were the case then the rapid production/consumption cycle of NO during $NH_2OH$ oxidation would not be observed. Experiments to demonstrate the role of NO in $NH_2OH$ oxidation by pre-incubating washed cells with PTIO with the goal to observe quenching of $NH_3$ or $NH_2OH$-dependent $O_2$ consumption were inconclusive. It is possible that PTIO is only effective during active growth of *N. viennensis* (which was observed; Figure 1), or perhaps PTIO was ineffective at chelating rapidly cycling NO at the high cell densities used in the MR chamber.

### $N_2O$ in N. viennensis *cultures originates from the abiotic reaction of biotic N-oxide intermediates with medium or cellular components*

Previous studies measuring $N_2O$ in pure and enrichments cultures of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea suggested an enzymatic origin of measured $N_2O$ (Santoro *et al.*, 2011; Loscher *et al.*, 2012; Jung *et al.*, 2014); however, control experiments to test for abiotic reduction of NO to $N_2O$, including by medium components, were not performed. We observed a high rate of NO reduction to $N_2O$ in FWM both in the presence of an NO-donating molecule and in the presence of $NH_2OH$ plus heat-killed cells. Based on the difference in metal content of both media, we propose that reduction of NO to $N_2O$ in FWM is facilitated by iron, which is present in FWM at a relatively high final concentration of $7.5\,uMl^{-1}$ in the form of FeNaEDTA but absent from HKM. Under anoxic conditions, in which the metal components of the medium are reduced, the Fe(II) and reduced trace

metals act as chemical catalysts for NO reduction to $N_2O$. This 'chemodenitrification' process has been implicated by hypothesis in contributing to abiotic $N_2O$ production in reduced environments where Fe(II) is abundant (Samarkin *et al.*, 2010; Kampschreur *et al.*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2015).

### *Proposed pathway for ammonia chemolithotrophy in ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea in which NO facilitates $NH_2OH$ oxidation*

Our revised model of ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy of the Thaumarchaeota places NO as a necessary co-reactant for the oxidation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ (Figure 5a). This NO-dependent dehydrogenation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ is not based on novel chemistry because ammonia-oxidizing bacteria, and others such as aerobic methane-oxidizing bacteria, utilize the heme-containing cytochrome P460 enzyme to facilitate this reaction (Figure 5b; Simon and Klotz, 2013). Instead, the central reaction in the Thaumarchaeotal nitrification pathway is based on a proposed novel copper enzyme capable of performing known P460 activity. This model achieves the proper substrate stoichiometry and reductant flow. In addition, the modelled rapid cycling of NO (and, concomitantly electrons) to support $NH_2OH$ oxidation would logically preclude any enzymology for NO reduction to $N_2O$. In agreement with this requirement, none of the sequenced genomes of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaeota revealed the presence of canonical and alternate inventory for NO reduction to $N_2O$. Nitrite reductase (*nirK*) is encoded in the genomes of all published sequences of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea (Bartossek *et al.*, 2010, 2012) and *nirK* transcripts have been detected at very high steady-state levels in environmental metatranscriptomes (Hollibaugh *et al.*, 2011; Radax *et al.*, 2012), which makes this enzyme the most parsimonious source of the NO needed to support ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy. The proposal that $NO_2^-$ reduction and not $NH_2OH$ oxidation is the more likely source of the NO required for the oxidation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ is supported by the following logic and reasoning:

(1) A two-step oxidation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ via a NO intermediate would require the operation of two enzyme complexes that feed extracted electrons (3+1) via two redox shuttles to two quinone-reactive enzymes. In addition to requiring additional unknown inventory, such a pathway would also not generate enough electrons needed to provide for effective linear electron flow ($4-2-1=1$). In contrast, the proposed one-step model provides for effective linear electron flow ($5-2-1=2$; Figure 5). The bioenergetics contrast stands in the context that an observed active NirK activity would draw one electron per reduced $NO_2^-$ in both scenarios in addition to that the two-step model would include two linearly connected sources of NO production in a genomic background not encoding identifiable NO detoxification inventory and a scenario
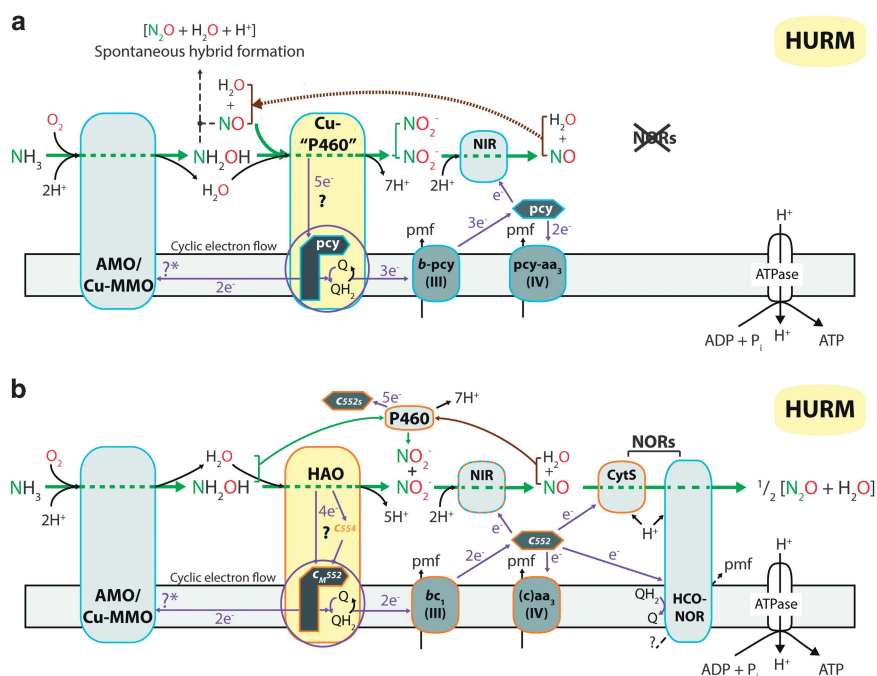
**Figure 5** Proposed pathway for ammonia-dependent chemolithotrophy in the ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea (**a**) compared with known pathways of N-oxide transformation in ammonia-oxidizing bacteria (**b**). The model presents a central role of NO in the oxidation of $NH_2OH$, and its contribution to hybrid formation of $N_2O$ as proposed by Stieglmeier *et al.* (2014b). Due to the lack of heme proteins including HAO and quinone-reactive proteins such as $c_M552$ (CycB), redox processes in ammonia-oxidizing archaea are likely mediated by Cu protein complexes (Walker *et al.*, 2010; Stahl and de la Torre, 2012). The present literature suggests that $NH_3$ is monooxygenated to $NH_2OH$ by ammonia monooxygenase (AMO) and that $NH_2OH$ is dehydrogenated to $NO_2^-$ by activities of a number of unknown enzymes (Walker *et al.*, 2010; Stahl and de la Torre, 2012; Vajrala *et al.*, 2012). Based on existing chemistry facilitated by heme proteins in ammonia-oxidizing bacteria (**b**), the model in (**a**) proposes that the oxidation of $NH_2OH$ to $NO_2^-$ and subsequent extraction of five electrons results from a reaction of $NH_2OH$ with NO and $H_2O$ facilitated by a novel Cu-containing enzyme. This could be one of the multi-copper oxidases encoded in all genomes of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaeota (Bartossek *et al.*, 2010, 2012; Walker *et al.*, 2010). NO is provided by the Cu-containing NirK, which enzymatically reduces one $NO_2^-$ per $NH_3$ oxidized to NO. A fraction of the enzyme-produced NO and $NH_2OH$ could react to form $N_2O$ by hybrid formation. The figure was adapted from Simon and Klotz (2013). AMO/Cu-MMO, ammonia monooxygenase; $c552$, cytochrome $c$ redox carrier; CytS: cytochrome $c$'-beta (see Simon and Klotz, 2013, and references therein); HAO, hydroxylamine dehydrogenase; HCO, heme-copper oxidase; HURM, hydroxylamine:ubiquinone redox module (see Simon and Klotz, 2013, and references therein); NirK, Cu-containing NO-forming nitrite reductase; NOR, nitric oxide reductase; P460, tetraheme cytochrome $c$ protein P460 (CytL; see Simon and Klotz, 2013, and references therein); pcy, plastocyanin; pmf, proton-motive force; Q/QH$_2$, quinone/quinol pool.

that should not lead to stoichiometric conversion of N-$NH_3$ to N-$NO_2^-$.

(2) Isotopic measurements of $^{15}N_2O$ produced by *N. viennensis* suggest a 'hybrid signature' in that one N atom would originate from $NH_3$ (contributed as $NH_2OH$) and one atom would originate from $NO_2^-$ (contributed as NO) (Stieglmeier *et al.*, 2014b). This finding also contradicts a two-step model and supports the model shown in Figure 5.

The proposed one-step model is parsimonious in that it requires the innovation of only one enzyme in ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea. Based on existing knowledge, this novel enzyme is copper-based and facilitates known redox chemistry in context with known enzyme complexes such as the $NH_2OH$-producing ammonia monooxygenase, NO-producing NirK, plastocyanin redox carriers and a quinone-reactive membrane protein, all of which are copper proteins and have been identified in all sequenced genomes of ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea (Walker *et al.*, 2010; Bartossek *et al.*, 2012; Stahl and de la Torre, 2012).

We propose that the model of catabolic electron flow presented here (Figure 5a) applies to all obligate chemolithotrophic ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea because it is based on and supported by results from above referenced experiments with marine ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea including *N. maritimus* SCM1 and experiments with terrestrial ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaeota including the data presented here for *N. viennensis* EN76$^T$.

## Conclusion

The present study establishes that both ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea and bacteria contribute to the production of $N_2O$, although the mechanisms by which they do so are distinct. Whereas the ammonia-oxidizing bacteria produce $N_2O$ enzymatically through nitrifier denitrification, the ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea release intermediates (NO and/or $NH_2OH$), which are then reduced non-enzymatically to $N_2O$ in anoxic microenvironments

(Zhu-Barker *et al.*, 2015). Due to the relatively high abundance and activity of Thaumarchaea across terrestrial, freshwater, and marine environments (Zhang *et al.*, 2010; Pratscher *et al.*, 2011; French *et al.*, 2012; Berg *et al.*, 2015) and their established tolerance of low ammonium and oxygen environments (Martens-Habbena *et al.*, 2009), their contributions to NOx emissions is likely of high global significance (Babbin *et al.*, 2015). For instance, marine Thaumarchaea may be essential in providing a substantial concentration of NO to denitrifying microorganisms within oxygen minimum zones, and in return, the denitrifiers could provide organic carbon to the Thaumarchaeota to establish a nitrifying-denitrifying consortium (Karner *et al.*, 2001; Beman *et al.,* 2012; Ganesh *et al.*, 2015). The present study also supports that both ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea and bacterial ammonia-oxidizers likely contribute to chemodenitrification in terrestrial environments through the release and subsequent transformation of metabolites ($NH_2OH$, NO and $NO_2^-$) either abiotically or via denitrifying consortia (Jones *et al.*, 2015), which dominate in less oligotrophic environments. The elucidation of NO as an essential pathway intermediate and released metabolite of the ammonia-oxidizing Thaumarchaea in the absence of a nitrifier denitrificaiton pathway will allow refinement of the relative contributions of ammonia-oxidizing microorganisms to global $N_2O$ production.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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